

Christmas he sent her twenty pounds anonymously, and he has sometimes spoken about her. But when I saw her she was doing well with her boarders, and she told me quite frankly she was not in need of anything, except to be left alone to live her own life."

Lidgate nodded.

"She told me that to-night—I mean what passed between you—but I think she may have regretted it. She is very lonely now, it is easy to see."

"Then I will go again. I should like to go to-morrow, perhaps," said Katherine eagerly.

"I would wait a little," he counseled. "At least till we have settled something between us. You understand how more than willing I am to help her, only in my case it is even more difficult than in yours."

"I can see that. You were very intimate with John Reedham, were you not?"

"We were like brothers once. We lodged together in our young manhood for seven years, and—and we both loved the same woman."

The words were out before he could keep them back, and though his face flushed a little, he was conscious of a sudden and sweet relief.

Of one thing, at least, he could be sure that Katherine Wrede would not misunderstand. She possessed in a very rare degree the gift of sympathetic intuition, which so often dispenses with the need for words.

"Oh, how you interest me!" she said, leaning forward with a soft beautiful light in her eyes. "And yet how terribly sad it all is! I have never understood how a man like Reedham could go wrong. He had everything to keep him right. Has the mystery ever been cleared up?"

He shook his head.

"It will never be now, I fear."

The significance of his words were not lost upon her.

"You believe that he committed suicide," she said, with parted lips.

He nodded.

"In my own mind I have not the slightest doubt of it. How else could he have eluded the vigilance of the police?"

"It has been done," she suggested. "One night Major Pollock, from Scotland Yard was dining here, and it made me quite creepy to hear him talking about the number of mysterious disappearances there are in London. Men, and women too, simply fall out, and are heard of no more. They go out from their homes in the morning apparently in good health and spirits, and without any pressing cares, and they never come back."

"They have ulterior motives, I should say, in every case. They leave London and hide themselves in other countries."

"The Major says not. He says more than half create new personalities, new careers, new environments for themselves, in fact, become different people."

Lidgate did not seem credulous.

"Such a course would not have been possible to poor Reedham. I am forced to the conclusion that there were wheels within wheels, a portion of his life that we never suspected. And I am certain, as certain as one can be of anything for which there is no ocular proof, that he is dead."

"It would be better so, perhaps, and one day in the future you may perhaps comfort his poor wife."

"I would marry her now, Miss Wrede, but I dare not ask her. She is still absolutely devoted to his memory."

"Ah, but one cannot live forever on memory," she reminded him. "I do hope it may come to pass. You have been so truly a friend to her, you deserve happiness. And I shall always be glad that I have known this."

"I had no intentions of telling you. I betrayed myself because you are so sympathetic. I have not yet ceased wondering at myself."

She smiled, and at the moment held up a warning finger.

"Hark, I hear them coming out of the library."

At the moment the drawing-room door opened and Archibald Currie, a fine and picturesque figure in his velvet coat, appeared. He nodded pleasantly to Lidgate.

"I shall be with you in a moment, Mr. Lidgate. Charlton is going, Katherine, come and bid him good-night."



They left the door ajar, and Lidgate could see out into the spacious hall. The man they called Charlton stood under the hall lamp, a figure of ease and grace. His clean-shaven face showed clear-cut as a cameo against the bright light. It was not familiar to Lidgate, yet somehow it interested him deeply. As Charlton turned to bid Miss Wrede good-night, he glanced back and saw Lidgate where he stood before the fireplace in the inner room. He turned away with such sharpness that Katherine Wrede was surprised. Almost before the door closed upon him he took out his handkerchief to wipe the cold sweat drops from his brow.

CHAPTER VI.

A BUSY EVENING.

"WHO is that man?" enquired Lidgate bluntly. The unusual question naturally surprised them, but Mr. Currie replied frankly enough.

"One of my clerks, of whom I wished to know a little more than can be learned in business hours. His name is Charlton."

"Charlton!" repeated Lidgate, musingly. "I

thought I knew him, I must have made a mistake. Pray excuse the question."

"Why, certainly, and how are you after your American trip, Mr. Lidgate? You look very fit."

"I am all right, thank you."

"I hope you enjoyed it?"

"Yes, I think I did, but I am not a keen traveler. I am afraid London has got me body and soul, I am restless away from her, and she quickly lures me back."

The elder man shook his head.

"That I can't understand. Has my brother mentioned that I have serious thoughts of retiring one of these days?"

"Don't, Mr. Currie. Recall to your remembrance all the men you have known who have quitted active life at your age, and the results. I think that you will find that these results have been almost without exception disastrous. Slacken off a bit by all means, and take this young lady to see a bit of the world, but don't retire."

"Do you hear that rank heresy, Kate?" enquired Mr. Currie, with a smile, which had a certain amount of triumph in it. "Yes, she is the culprit."

"Women usually are," answered Lidgate with an answering smile. "And very often they merely prepare a rod for their own backs."



"Oh, you wicked man!" cried Katherine, shaking her finger at him. "Just when I had got Uncle Archie nearly persuaded, you come in with your horrid warnings! Don't you see how he is pining for the country and fresh air and quiet occupations?"

Lidgate laughed outright.

"I don't see anything of the kind, I am glad to say, Miss Wrede. I gaze upon a remarkably hale and handsome man, with more energy in his little finger than most men, and myself, perhaps," he added with a touch of gay banter, "have in my whole anatomy."

"That may could be true of you; I could very well believe it," she replied demurely. "But by admitting it you damage your case. He ought not to be so full of energy. If he could rest more and take it easy the necessity would not be so urgent. But, as you know, he simply lives every moment of his days with his whole might."

"The only way to live, believe me, Kate. A short life and a full if not a merry one, is surely the most satisfying for every man."

"And he fills up the very scanty leisure he permits himself with doing things for other people. Even you, Mr. Lidgate, would be astonished at the sum of them."

"Perhaps not; I hear of them too often," he answered. "And I am afraid you will look askance at me because I have come to ask him to do one more."

"You may regard it as done," she said with an affectionate glance at her guardian. "Well, if you will excuse me, I shall go to the library; I have two notes to write. I shall see you before you go, Mr. Lidgate."

Lidgate's eyes followed her to the door.

"A most beautiful creature," he said with a faint, involuntary sigh, which seemed to embody regret over his lost youth.

"She is indeed, and all heart. The combination is rare; so often the beautiful casket is empty of soul. I bless God for having sent her to me at a time when I must necessarily have begun to feel more acutely that sense of personal loneliness which is the cross of a solitary man. You ought to marry, Lidgate, before it is too late. Why have you never married?"

He leaned back in his chair as he put the question with that kindly solicitude which so often compelled confidence, and which could never be in any circumstances offensive.

Lidgate's face flushed a little.

"Well, sir, since you have asked the question, I will be frank. The only woman I have ever cared about married another man."

"Ah," said Archibald Currie with an understanding nod. "Pray excuse me, I did not pause to remember that perhaps I might be probing an old wound. I am very sorry, but doubtless you have had your compensations?"

"No," said Lidgate, with a sudden fierceness, "I have not had any compensations. And of late I have had to stand by and see her suffer acutely, and know myself powerless to help, precluded, indeed, by my position from offering any help."

"A trying experience; very trying. I had no idea of this, Mr. Lidgate; I offer you my sincere sympathy. You bear it like a man."

"I doubt it very much," said Lidgate gloomily. "May I now tell you what I have come about?"

"Surely, and if Katherine said, if to help you, or any protegee of yours is in my power, you look upon it as done."

"It is about John Reedham's boy I have come. He wants to be taken by the hand; I would like to do it myself, to take him in at London Wall, but you can appreciate the difficulties in the way."

"Ah, surely, of course I can," replied Archibald Currie, as the vision of his brother's stern face rose up before him. "What age is the lad? Bless me, I had forgotten about him. I have often spoken to my ward about his mother, but I might have done something for the boy before this."

"He has not required it. Up till June of this year he was at school in Surrey with some friends of his mother, the school he had been at for the last four years. He was very loth to go back, the youngster had the chivalrous desire to help his mother, and it was only when it was pointed out that another year at school would better equip him for his purpose that he consented to remain. When

he came home at midsummer, three weeks before the usual time on account of an epidemic that had broken out in the school, I was in America. There was no one to hold him back. The young rascal went out on his own, so to speak, and took a book-keeper's place in a petty tradesman's shop out Clapton way."

"I like that, it showed a manly spirit," said Archibald Currie, with a well-pleased look on his face.

"It was not a suitable place for the boy, however, and he has never been happy there. Last night I saw him, and he had been paid off."

"Ah, poor lad, then he is in immediate need of a situation?"

"Yes. He is almost fifteen, I believe, but he is very well grown for his age; a fine, intelligent, handsome boy, though he has inherited his father's impulsive temperament and quick temper."

"These may help him, if they are properly guided," said the old man musingly. "They go hand in hand usually with other and more valuable qualities. It was a tragedy that! Poor Reedham! Have you any theory about him?"

"My theory can be put into few words. I believe him to be dead."

"But how? when? where?" enquired Currie, struck by the confidence with which the words were spoken.

Reedham shook his head.

"These questions, of course, I can't answer, but I have the conviction. There are many suicides in London in the course of a year that are never identified, and some even that never come to light at all."

"It sounds ghastly. How is his poor wife bearing up?"

"Not well; she has had a hard year. If you can do anything for the boy you will lighten her burden, Mr. Currie. If you could take him to Old Broad Street I should be most grateful. I hardly like to suggest it, but if it is the custom of your office to take premiums I should be only too glad to pay, because I can't take him as I should like to do at our own place."

"Tut, tut. I am the head of my concern. I can do as I like, and Reedham's boy shall come most certainly. I'll hand him over to Charlton, and tell him to keep a special eye on him."

"Thank you very much. I felt sure you would be willing to do something," said Lidgate, in tones of relief.

"The longer time goes on the more inexplicable appears Reedham's defalcations," said Archibald Currie, musingly. "Have you any theory about that, then?"

Lidgate hesitated a moment.

"At first I was dumbfounded, and naturally leaped to the conclusion that he had been leading a double life. But I have parted with that belief. I think there are two explanations which, when put together, may suffice. Reedham had several impecunious relatives, one of them most disreputable, who was a constant drain upon him. Part of his defalcation may have gone to cover some disgrace into which this person got himself. That is only surmise, suggested by various things Mrs. Reedham has said to me from time to time. The other is the extraordinary jealousy and antagonism that existed between him and your brother James."

The old man knit his brows, and nodded understandingly.

"I did not know Reedham well; in fact, I don't think I have met him more than half a dozen times, and then it was in the most casual way. But putting two and two together, the thing becomes plainer. I can easily understand how my brother would act upon a warm, impulsive temperament. Between ourselves, Lidgate, I have felt it myself, and we could never have been in business together."

Lidgate continued, finding his task of explanation much easier than he had expected.

"Reedham was very jealous of his position in the firm, and he constantly made himself wretched imagining slights were being put upon him, especially by Mr. Currie. Then he thought Mrs. Currie and her daughters were offensively patronising to his wife. The very idea of it maddened him. My own belief, in view of all these sidelights, which have become clearer with lapse of time, inclines me to think that Reedham was ambitious to make a clever coup-d'etat on his own account, to force recognition, as it were, from the senior partners. When he discovered that disaster had ensued, he could not face it, of course."



"Ay, ay; a most feasible explanation. I believe it is the true one," said Archibald Currie, musingly. "Poor, poor chap. It was not worth it. He was happy in his home; he had enough for his needs, and what else mattered? He had lost his sense of proportion. Ay, ay; what a number of catastrophes there are in life which the exercise of a little common-sense could avert!"

"You are right, sir; but I must not keep you longer. Then I may tell Mrs. Reedham to send the boy to you?"

"If you will leave me her address I will write myself to-night. I am glad you came to me. The boy is evidently worth saving, and I am only too pleased to be able thus indirectly to be of service to his mother."

Lidgate took a card from his case, wrote Mrs. Reedham's address on it, and almost immediately took his leave.

Archibald Currie sat still, pondering in his mind the thing he had heard. His face was wearing its most preoccupied expression. When his ward returned to the room she glanced at him anxiously.

(To be continued.)